

“One Ring To Rule Them All...” – Gaming Lord of the Rings

Introduction

This article is intended to provide some background for our 'Lord of the Rings' skirmish game which premieres at SALUTE this year. Apart from the immediate setting and an analysis of the great little game system, we also hope to provide a little 'historical' background to some of the other game systems which have been based on the novels over the years....

What A LOTR Game Systems... by IvanCongreave & Peter Merritt

Well, LOTR itself needs little introduction – if you've read it, fine; if you've only seen the films, well, you're missing a whole lot more... Anyway, the games have tended to fall into two main types – boardgames (much favoured in the USA), and figure-games. There now follows a quick and undoubtedly incomplete list of some old and new favourites.

Boardgames

A degree of internet searching (via such excellent resources as <http://www.boardgamegeek.com>) has turned-up no less than 34 previous efforts in this line, although it has to be said that not all could be described as 'classics'.... First off has to be "War of the Ring" by SPI (1977), with three linked battle games (now a collectors item). Two board games were produced by ICE in the late 80's: Riddle of the Ring and Fellowship of the Ring. But with the release of the Peter Jackson films has come a wave of titles and styles, ranging from mission-specific adventures through to recreations of a particular book ("Two Towers" etc), collectible card games (CCG) and even versions of 'Risk'. However, I've been asked by local Tolkien lovers not to mention the special 'Monopoly' edition - no wonder Sauron was desperate, the rent if you land on the Mount Doom Hilton is shocking...!

Figures

In terms of *wargaming* (rather than collector's ranges), leaving aside numerous generic instances of dwarves, elves and so-on, the first really comprehensive attempt has to be the extensive "Middle Earth" range from the 1970's by **MiniFigs**. Although quite long-lived, I understand that it disappeared somewhat rapidly, to be replaced by their 'Valley of the Four Winds' range. Then there was a very large range by **Heritage Miniatures Inc.** of the USofA. By the time we get to the 1980's, licensed ranges were being made by the likes **Mithril** (to tie in with the **ICE** role-playing system), **Grenadier** and **Citadel** and compatible (unlicensed) ranges by **Ral Partha**. More recently in the 1990's the guys at **Harlequin** (or **Black Tree Design**) produced a range too. There are, quite possibly, others I've lost track of since...

More recently, to accompany the Peter Jackson films **Games Workshop** has released an extensive range (if you agree with the film) of 28mm figures, together with an adaptation of it's existing Warhammer rules and **Mithril** continue to make book based LotR figures, although the tie in with the roleplaying system is now defunct. . Back to Workshop, whilst their rules are not to everyone's taste, they do give a fast-flowing game, and the figures are beautifully sculpted – as you might expect for that price! Any 'ancients' or 'early medieval' player (especially if Saxons/Vikings are your bag) should really check-out what is available to mix-in with existing units.

As an alternative, however, neck and neck in the film tie-in stakes is the vast variety of pre-painted figures and special sets of collectable miniature game (CMG) from Sabretooth Games using the Combat Hex system. A word about the latter. For those recently arrived from our parallel universe, these 35-40mm figures come pre-painted and mounted on a large, plastic base on which are printed all the factors you need, plus mechanical 'sliders' to note damage on the older bases and dials on the newer versions. They have symbols printed on them to indicate different fluctuating magic powers etc - so NO written orders, status sheets or markers required!, well that's what they say. I have to say that after using them for some time now I have had to devise my own curator card for each one to remember the Very small symbols that can look alike across the table. Because each figure is so unique and cheap to make (and to make more money), there are now literally hundreds of figures in the range, with the more important characters having several variations available. OK, they're not exactly up to Mithril, Copplestone or Perry standards of sculpting - but they are cheap and the system delivers good skirmish-level games with real character differences. And while the basic figures are, err, basic, just take a look at the special sets of cave troll, Sauron, Nazgul, Tree beard and of course Bernard the Balrog, then tell me you're not tempted. Some of the other add-on's include sets of maps that are very well produced and come double side for extra playability. The gaming system is fairly easy, initiative roll, movement and finally combat. Combat is mandatory when figures are within range, either base to base or ranged weapons, this does make it interesting.

True, the company does operate the tedious old 'Cornflakes' ploy, with the odd rare goody being hidden amongst dozens of basic figures (they're sold in sealed booster packs) - but many traders offer 'bucket deals' of spares at ridiculous prices, which would allow you to build a quite reasonable force for 'massed skirmishes'. Either that or look for plenty of offshore bargains via eBay here or abroad; and at least you won't be eating Cornflakes for the next six months.

Anyway, both the Warhammer and CombatClix ranges are faithful to the film interpretations of costumes and weaponry, although one has to wonder just how much the original designers read – sure, the Rohirrim seem perfectly OK, but why are those Elves carrying some sort of Naginata at Helms Deep (let alone why are they even in this part of the film!?) rather than the long, straight blades Mr T actually *described*. And since when are Gondorians mentioned clanking around in all that semi-plate armour (presumably cast-off from the props dept of 'Excalibur'!?).

Rules

A word on rules. Of course, the very existence of those early ranges did give rise to some very forgettable efforts, but one - "**The Lidless Eye**" – was a privately produced set of WRG 5th/6th edition Ancients rule-adaptations and extensively researched army lists which first brought fantasy battles close to 'mainstream' combat systems. Long out of print but still discussed on the web, I'm sure someone at the Warlords could tell you more...

Then again, those wacky guys at SELWG wrote and Skytrex published a set of their own tabletop **Battle rules for Middle Earth**, circa 1976. Copies still appear on eBay, from time to time, or you could contact their club Secretary to see if anyone has further details.

Still, all of the above were/are worthy attempts to bring a truly sweeping alternative world to life in adventures, skirmishes or large-scale battles. In 25/28mm, that is. Of course, if you were *really* silly you'd try and match the giant sweep of imagination with an equally large-scale game, using one of the over-scale toy-ranges produced for the film collector's market - speaking of which.....

Today's Game System

The game features duelling between some of the main characters from the various books and films. It is based on a cracking little commercial boxed game "**Star Wars Epic Duels**" designed by Craig Van Ness (with assistance from Rob Daviau), for veteran games company HASBRO. I can heartily recommend purchasing a copy - if you can find it...! As at the time of writing it's certainly still available from eBay, and has quite some following on various web sites in the USA & UK. There was talk of an official expansion set for a while, but the less satisfying 'HeroClix' replacement is financially much more lucrative.

Using those rules to base our Lotr system, the players are split evenly between 'Good' and 'Evil'. Each player has a 'team' featuring at least one main character, plus a less powerful helper or three; for example, at Amon-Hen Aragorn tends to have one or two of the Hobbits in tow. An exception to this arrangement is in larger scenarios we have planned featuring either the Rohirrim or – my favourite – the dear old Orcs. In the latter case players will be using 2-3 figures clustered together as a single 'unit', because frankly it's the only way they stand a chance! But – even in one of those bigger games - do not despise the minor characters in your team: they may not win it for you, but don't ignore them as even the Hobbits can help by stabbing an opponent with their ancient Barrow-weapons and wearing them down. And remember, "...I cannot be killed by the hand of Man...?"

Anyway, in the biggest games that we plan, there should be somewhere between 18-60+ striking figures on the table at the start of a game and provides a great deal of sustained (re)playability because of the different team structures and interactions of the characters. For the game at Salute Zero Seven we are going to start a little smaller with **Amon Sûl – Encounter at Weather Top**. This features the Ringwraiths and the Halflings, Gandalf, Aragorn and Glorfindel, but check out the background article for more details.

So how does the game work? Well, once the teams are decided, players collect their pack of special cards (see below) and set-up their 'control panel' which shows the amount of damage each figure can take. When play begins, all take it in turns to **move** then **perform two 'actions'**, before the next gets to go. The order always alternates good/bad/good/bad etc, so each side has a chance, although individual characters could end-up in a tight spot if acting rashly and they run out of cards...

Basic movement is simple but subtle and uses two dice to provide some variability (depending on the roll, either one or all team characters may move, up to the amount scored); but the system's real interest and entertainment value comes from the special decks of cards which are used to determine both combat and special abilities. As these card packs are *unique* to each character/team, it is this feature especially which makes each game different and adds more true 'period flavour' than many simple (and not-so-simple) points total systems.

After movement, players then have their two 'actions' which they may perform - this can be **picking up a card** (maximum of 10, but no cards = exhaustion; very bad news, survival wise); or **play a card** (normally to make various attacks). These can be 'ordinary' combats (simply bashing adjacent characters with your trusty weapon), or 'special events' (involving some trick or advanced training or plot device which increases your attack or defence). And just for a bit of variability, *only* the cards with a picture of the character can be used for that character - so again, there may come a time when you are forced to bring the 'little helpers' into action while waiting for a better card to turn up "OK Hobbits, front rank – wait for it - fire!".

The good thing about all this is that no single character has a dominant position in the game. True, the likes of Aragorn and the Wizards are very, VERY tough propositions, but you'll find that, like any good *historical* battle, it's *teamwork* which gets results - as well as a small degree of luck.

GAME EQUIPMENT & CREDITS

Development – You wouldn't be seeing this game without the combined efforts of **John Treadaway, Kevin Dallimore, Ivan Congreave and Brian Cameron**, plus numerous unsung 'guinea pigs' at the South London Warlords who helped to play-test the system. And a very special thank you to **Chris Steadman** for his help and encouragement with this and many such projects over the years...

Figures – These are 'where it all started' really, coming from the truly vast but now sadly disappearing range of "**Armies of Middle Earth**" (or *AOME* for short), by "**Play-Along Toys**". Sold pre-painted in single or group packs (plus larger 'special equipment sets'), they are all drawn straight from the film trilogy. Best place to find them now is via eBay, or wait for a re-release when Peter Jackson does (for) "The Hobbit"... At least they're not too expensive (yet), and you don't need that many for a skirmish anyway! All improvements on the original figures and basing were by **Kevin Dallimore, Andy Flood and John Treadaway**. The rest of my collection is straight out of the box from either Woolworths, Toys-R-Us, or a handful of extremely useful [eBay sellers](#), both here and abroad. In particular, I'd really, really like to thank "**NDROBOHOBBITS**" and "**SARAS-SMIAL**" for their help, advice and occasionally as warped a sense of humour as my own!

Trees & Cloths – The superb trees etc were courtesy of that excellent veteran terrain-maker **The Last Valley**, who after much pleading now has an email address at andy@scrappie.karoo.co.uk. The large hex-cloths are only a fraction of the range created by a superb, helpful character from the USA, one **Eric Hotz** – see <http://www.hotzartworks.com/> - whose ever-expanding product list (and interests!) are worth adding to any wargamer's browser.

Scenery - I'd like to thank **John Treadaway** (with **Ivan Congreave**) of the South London Warlords for all his efforts in building a 1/24th scale version of 'Weathertop' for the first scenario; a truly talented maniac! Of course, if you're not that far gone or have trouble lifting half a mountain, you could do worse than shop around some of the better ruin manufacturers – I have used plenty of the excellent 28mm ranges from both the ever-helpful **Fantascene** (<http://fantascene.net/>) and German-based, too-good-for-my-wallet **Ziterdes** (try <http://www.wargamesworkshop.co.uk/>) for many of my try-out games, plus the odd bespoke item via eBay (many built using **Hirst Blocks**).